

GETTING THE LONG-TERM JOBLESS DEBATE OFF THE GROUND: A RESPONSE TO GETTING THE LONG TERM JOBLESS INTO WORK

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INTRODUCTION

Getting the Long Term Jobless Into Work is a welcome contribution to the (un)employment debate - because of its attempt to reflect on practical experience. It is critical that practical experience informs policy and program development.

It is the practicalities of policies and programs that ultimately determine access opportunities and outcomes for the long-term unemployed e.g., required education levels, whether or not there are aptitude tests, how and where positions are advertised, whether or not training providers have been adequately briefed on population-specific groups and the availability of funds for extra tuition.

It is important, therefore, that the practical experiences of the agencies who participated in the consultation be documented. (pp 23-24) This will require detailed profiles so that readers can judge how the experience is being interpreted.

Nonetheless, there are three implicit ideas in the analysis - **authoritarian submissiveness, blaming the victim** and **marginalisation**.

Authoritarian submissiveness is the process of accepting employment and training policies and programs - without seriously questioning their naturalness and inevitability. Job generation and alternative enterprise development have been deferred by the Commonwealth Government with a decision not to include LEIs within the 1988-89 Budget. This decision, however, does not mean that job generation and alternative enterprise development are not relevant to the long-term unemployed. Not addressing these issues, however, could be interpreted as opposition. A brief reference to expensive and risky job creation programs (p 19) does not constitute an adequate case for their relevance.

Blaming the victim is the process of (in)directly blaming the victims of economic circumstances for the circumstances. An exclusive emphasis on developing and maintaining employability reflects and reinforces a myth. An analysis which focusses on how to assist individuals implicitly assumes that the long-term unemployed are responsible for their own unemployment and brief references to the increasing numbers of long-term unemployed (p1) and declining Federal Government expenditure (p 1) does not constitute an alternative analysis.

Marginalisation is the process of assuming and accepting employment and training equity as marginal to mainstream activities. This

marginalisation is promoted through equity-specific programs and community agencies restricted to complementing and administering government employment and training policies and programs.

Of course, these ideas permeate the context, structure and direction of equity and mainstream employment and training programs and, therefore, the paper is simply reflecting and reinforcing this permeation. The source of these ideas is the economic, political and cultural context. There are, of course, practical reasons why these ideas are not questioned. They include the reality of operating projects which leave little time for questioning wider realities. Governments are also emphasising cost-effective usage of funds and require community agencies to conform with specified policies and priorities. And there is another reality - the real individual needs of the long-term unemployed e.g., employment, housing and income.

The discussion paper argues that programs should provide for '*those who most need employment*' (p 1). It could be differently argued that limited resources limit labor market opportunities and outcomes.

ISSUES

There are five issues I wish to focus on:

- 1. Individual and System change.**
- 2. The relationship between equity and mainstream programs.**
- 3. Implicit and/or explicit compulsion.**
- 4. What placements for whose benefit.**
- 5. Community owned and controlled employment and training initiatives.**

Addressing these issues is a precondition to getting the debate about the long-term unemployed off the ground.

1. Individual and System change.

The focus of the discussion paper is the long-term unemployed - '*to review the experience of providers and participants in employment and training programs for the long-term jobless*' (p 4). It is interesting to consider why it is not long-term unemployment - with an emphasis on causes rather than consequences.

Of course, it is appropriate to focus on the people who are the casualties of (un)employment. But, an exclusive focus on the conditions of the long-term unemployed will mean that the contributing conditions will not be addressed. It is acknowledged "*That the Australian economy is failing to provide enough jobs for all those seeking them is axiomatic - direct job creation is therefore important. The National Advisory Group on Local Employment Initiatives (NAGLEI) has dealt with most of the issues, although it did not directly address issues relevant to employment creation for to long term unemployed people.*" (p 14) Given this self-evident observation, it is relevant to query whether there should be more focus on the causes of long-term unemployment than on the conditions of the long-term

unemployed.

CSVs **Employment Access Program** has a focus on the individual. After all, the Program is primarily assessed on its employment, training and education placements. What the Program does attempt, however, is to acknowledge context which impacts on placement opportunities and outcomes. What the Program does about this is addressed in 2: **The Relationship Between Equity and Mainstream Programs.**

2. The Relationship Between Equity and Mainstream Programs.

What the analysis of good practice tends to avoid is the inter-relationship between equity and mainstream programs. There are exceptions such as the consideration of slow worker permits but the argument is marginalised. It is suggested that slow worker permits be reviewed, linked to award wages and progress to full award wages (p 15).

A more systematic approach to the conditions experienced by workers who have disabilities would need to go beyond slow worker permits into equal opportunity and industrial legislation, equipment and workplace modification funds and a resourced affirmative employment policy and strategy. In particular, there is a need to consider job subsidies targetted on the (re)integration of workers who have disabilities as an alternative to slow worker permits.

Job subsidies could be exploited as creatively as slow worker permits. The assumption in the discussion paper seems to be that the experience of Jobsupport in providing pre and post placement support for workers who have intellectual disabilities is dependent on slow worker permits. (pp 13-14) The **EAP** is also involved in providing pre and post placement support and uses the wage subsidy Jobstart. But, then, the discussion paper proposes an expansion of slow worker permits e.g., to "*non-english speaking migrants working in human service occupations.*" (p 14) While the significance of "*union involvement and support*" (p 14) is recognised, the industrial rights implications are not acknowledged - promoting the development of a twofold system of "**high**" and "**low**" productivity wages and workers. The assumption seems to be that if actual and/or claimed low productivity becomes an actual and/or claimed cause of unemployment and unemployability, then, the solution is to provide low wages.

Another example of marginalisation is the paper's proposal regarding work pools. It is suggested that work pools be encouraged under Skillshare "*for the purpose of supporting collective part-time ventures*" (p 15). It is argued that many of the jobless are actively seeking or would prefer part-time work and that "*Low paid employment is often exploitative and collective work pool arrangements, supported by employment and training agencies, might provide some protection.*" (p 14) Given that the enterprise component of Skillshare is optional and funding is targetted on Structured Skills Training and Open Access, collective part-time ventures will be invariably under-resourced. There is also an implicit assumption that these ventures will be transitional. The proposal will have the consequence of building-in the ingredients of failure and, therefore, discrediting alternative enterprise development.

Equity programs operate within the context of mainstream programs. CSVs **Employment Access Program** is an equity program. Yet, its outcomes depend on the successful placement of young people into mainstream employment, training and education opportunities.

EAP has not simply waited for opportunities to become outcomes. The Program recognises that outcomes critically depend on the structure of opportunities. Working alone or with other agencies, **EAP** has addressed or is addressing

Community Employment Program
Jobstart
Aptitude testing for Group Apprenticeship Schemes
Pre-apprenticeship courses
Negotiated targets within TAFE
STBs Pre-Employment Programs policy
Skillshare
Access to traineeships
Access and equity advisory mechanisms to the STB
Paid work experience

It is interesting that the paper has argued that competency testing "*could be subject of further research*" (p9). In contrast, **EAPs** action has been to oppose standardised aptitude testing for TAAP as inequitable. A singular achievement has been the role of the Melbourne-based access to training group which has contributed to the decision of Victoria's State Training Board to establish access and equity advisory mechanisms. Another achievement has been a decision to incorporate the **EAP** target group within the Youth Guarantee Employment Counselling and Placement Service.

The distinction between equity and mainstream programs is useful for analytical purposes. The discussion paper could have proceeded, however to examine equity as a characteristic of mainstream programs. The good practices of equity programs should also characterise mainstream programs - access, skills acquisition and orientation to the labour market (p 6).

There are, of course, points where individual and system change inter-relate and the paper has not identified how the **EAP**, for instance, addresses this inter-relationship. Not only does the **EAP** provide individualised counselling but it has also initiated policy and program changes in the apprenticeship area to facilitate access and equity - target group training funds, paid work experience and pre-apprenticeship courses.

3. Implicit and/or Explicit compulsion.

It is puzzling why the paper does not address the issue of implied and/or explicit compulsion. In a context of politically and economically defined finite resources allocated on a priority basis, there is an issue of whether or not the long-term unemployed will be denied income support if they do

not accept employment, training and education opportunities.

Compulsion is already a factor with labor market programs through work and activity tests. A current exception is J.E.T. Refusing to address this question of implicit and/or explicit compulsion could be interpreted as an endorsement of work and activity tests. The experience of the **EAP** is that voluntary choice is a critical factor in employment, training and education placement and retention.

Twelve years ago the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty was supporting a guaranteed minimum income - implying a right not to work. A key concept of the Social Security Review is the integration of income support and labor market programs. The review has argued that employment is a preferable option to subsisting on pensions and benefits. It is an implicit endorsement of the right to work.

4. What placements for whose benefit?

The Introduction (2.1) to Service Delivery (2) refers to the job placements of most agencies as mostly being low wage and relatively low skilled. Yet the section on Labour Market Orientation (2.4) does not address this critical issue.

CSVs **Employment Access Program** does place young people in low wage jobs. The significance of quality employment to worker satisfaction and employment retention is also recognised.

From September 1985 until 30 June 1988 1545 young people were assisted by the **EAP** - 73% male and 27% female. Of these, there were:

**718 long term employment placements - including 183
apprenticeships
135 long-term education and training placements
412 short-term employment or training**

Retention figures for all job placements indicates that approximately one third drop out within the first six weeks - highlighting the difficult transition problems experienced by the target group. Retention of young people in employment is significantly higher in jobs identified by the young people as "**good**" jobs - for example, apprenticeships and traineeships which offer training and a credential, jobs with supportive co-workers and bosses, and jobs which offer some job satisfaction and future.

Retention of the target group in apprenticeships has been positive - at 30th June 1988 the retention rates were:

**50% of 1986 commencements
62% of 1987 commencements
75% of 1988 commencements**

References to people seeking and/or preferring part-time work (p 14) needs

to be related to free choice and under what conditions people seek and/or prefer part-time work. It is also relevant to compare the industrial conditions of which part-time and full-time jobs - including the issue of unionisation.

Reference is made to "*client-driven job placement services*" (p 20) without reference to the realities of the placement process - matching unemployed and vacancies. There is a real issue as to who is the client - the employer wishing to fill a vacancy or an unemployed individual seeking a vacancy.

5. Community Owned and Controlled Employment and Training Initiatives.

The paper's discussion of the community sector's role is vague and imprecise. Reference is made to the community sector being a "*major provider of employment and training services*" (p3), the sector's "*degree of contact and expertise in working with unemployed people and income support recipients*" (p 3) and its being "*well placed and experienced in the provision of social and life skilling for particular groups in the community*"(p 20) is asserted and it is recommended that the community sector "*could be responsible for the development of access activities targeted to discouraged job seekers and designed to feed them into mainstream and equity employment and training programs.*" (p 20)

What is absent from this analysis is a discussion of the potential for community owned and controlled employment and training initiatives - quite distinct from public and private sector initiatives which may involve the community sector. The community sector is involved in the delivery of programs such as Skillshare (Commonwealth) and Joblink(Victoria and W.A.). The community sector's role is limited, however, to working within pre-determined program objectives and guidelines.

The assumption of the paper is that the community sector has a complementary administrative and publicity role - rather than an initiating role. Administering Government programs is appropriate but there is additional scope for funds to be available for initiatives designed and developed by the community sector - where the idea and the initiative is community owned and controlled. Reference is made in the discussion paper to the "*capacity of our employment and training system to change*" (p 21). Community owned and controlled employment and training initiatives have a critical potential to generate this capacity.

CONCLUSION

The debate about the long-term unemployed is about ideology and ideas such as full employment, high employment, the right to work, the right not to work and a guaranteed income. The debate is not served by muddling through ideology and ideas without realising their inter-relationship with and impact on practicalities.